

TIRISIS • AGRE KALIAKRA

FORTRESSES HISTORY LEGENDS





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KALIĀKRĀ

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Faraway to the north, at the coast of an ancient sea called “Euxeinos” (inhospitable) by the Greek and “Black” by the Slavic, water and land had been caught in severe war for centuries.

This was a war without a winner.

Endless fjords and frightful rock giants meet the dawn every morning and fall asleep every night with their eyes open like in a Viking saga. And amid this stone-made fairy tale, like a mysterious ship cutting through the waves of the endless sea stands the ancient Kaliakra, the capital of Despot Dobrotitsa, the proudest one among the Bulgarian mediaeval rulers.



This was a place of busy life for endless centuries back in the past. This small patch of land had been attracting nomads and conquerors for many centuries on end. Everyone left their impression on this land. What man created has long ago turned into ashes ground through the mills of Time. The secret passes in the rocks do not exist any longer. The trots of horse hooves and warrior cries have died long time ago. No footprints have marred the floor of the dirty passes. The ruins of ancient fortresses, palaces and churches stand like lone sentinels, silent witnesses of century-long history. And only the lonely wind haunts the ruins and whispers old-time tales. It tells about the wonderful treasures of Lyzimach, the miracles and martyrdom of St. Nicholas, the patron of seamen, the self-sacrifice of forty beautiful Bulgarian virgins who chose to die in the depths of the sea instead to live in the Ottoman harems.

Today this small piece of the long-suffering Bulgarian land is a standstill moment of ancient past. The stranger who has come by chance to this place feels like captain of an ancient ship. Sails of sundry colours blow above his head and the dawn brings to life midnight visions, even for a short moment only to remind amid the cutting brightness of rocky bastions that daylight is only white-hot moonbeams.

But only those gifted to daydream will catch the unique moment when the shadows of the past come to life. Crag standing on the solid rock sear up into the skies. Over there, up above, the wind blows the cloak and plays with the hair of the old despot. Steel clashes horribly onto steel. Arrows buzz like angry hornets. Dying moans and victorious cries rise up in the sky. Tender maiden lips murmur oaths of death and weave a most horrible wreath of braids to preserve their honour and their Bulgarian pride.

The sun is setting. Lights and shadows are sinking down in the sea. Only the purple rocks still glow, as if the blood of invaders and defenders has sprung out on their broad chest. Enchanted by these visions the stranger sits in the small restaurant amid the rocks with a glass of sparkling Bulgarian wine and tries to curb his thoughts.

Then everything falls into silence.

Only the ruins and the lonely beacon remain like eternal sentinels. And when the pale moon shines down on the silent rock giants, the silhouette of the brave girl who led her friends to their death emerges from the sea depths.

Even the tide cries with emotion. Soft maiden voice mourns over a youth never lived to its end and the wind plays its harp in accompaniment.



Kaliakra - The museum



Historical notes

The list of ancient and mediaeval chronicles mentioning this coast is long: Thirisis, Thiristis, Akre, Akre Castelum, Kaliakra, Kalatserka, Kilagra, Gelare...

Its first inhabitants, the Thirisiens, saw the advantages of this naturally fortified place. The fortified settlement established by them in the second half of 4th c B.C. grew into one of the major administrative and political and religious regional centres in the following centuries.

Circa the 5th c. B.C. the Thirisiens' lands were included in the boundaries of the Ordis kingdom, the most important and wealthy state-like formation in southeast Europe standing to the north of the ancient Greek colonies.

According to the ancient Greek geographer Strabon, during the time of Macedonian colonization the Tracian Thirisis became the citadel of Lyzimach, one of the successors of Alexander the Great who hid in the caves of the cliffs his innumerable treasures.

Later, when Thirisis fell into the boundaries of the Thracian kingdom, a vassal of Rome, ruled by Remetalk 1st (11th-12th c. B.C.), the Tracian Pharsalos Bitus became strategus of the fortress and restored the earlier fortification.

There is no written evidence about the history of this place after the Roman conquest. The written sources mention only its geographic location and its name along with it: Thiristis, Thrissa and others. The frequent Barbarian invasions at the end of the 3rd c. and final loss of the Roman territories north to the Danube turned the settlement into a border fortress. The newly built defense system changed its structure: the settlement now included two separately fortified parts: an inside and an

outside town. The main street was about 1300 m long and passed north to south along the whole citadel. It was lined with buildings, which foundations and separate walls have survived.

When the Roman Empire was divided in East and West, Thiristis remained in the borders of the East Roman empire, later called Byzantine. The inhabitants of the fortress grew in number in 5th-6th c., and Hierochles's guidebook mentions the citadel as one of the 15 fortified towns in the Minor Scitia province, now under the name Akre Castelum.

In that period, together with the fortifications, many new buildings of military, residential and economic functions were constructed within the town. The large number of one-piece and fragmented pottery, float-lights, jewelry other artifacts, and many coins minted by various emperors point at a busy life in Akre and speak about the spiritual and material culture of its inhabitants in the late Antiquity.

The town was abandoned after the foundation of the Bulgarian state in the 7th c. The unfavourable farming and climatic conditions fought off Slavic and Proto Bulgarian settlers for a long time and drove them to the more generous farming and animal-breeding areas of the Dobrudzha plateau.

Evidence about inhabitants of the cape in the period of the First Bulgarian State is sparse. Its name remains unknown either. The Bulgarian settlers who came to this place in the 10th c. found only the ruins of an abandoned town.

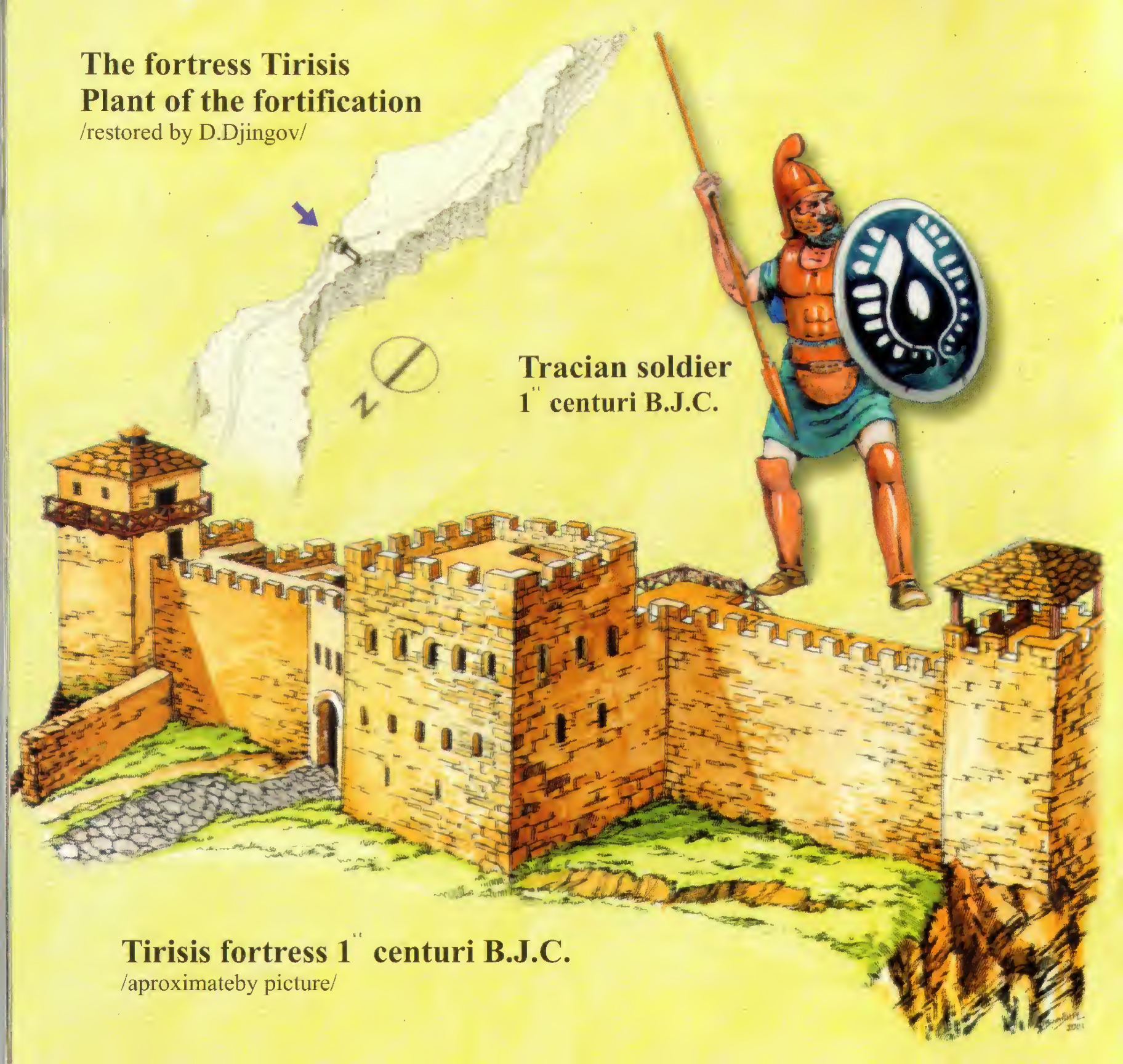
The fortress Tirisis Plant of the fortification

/restored by D.Djingov/

Tracian soldier
1st centuri B.J.C.

Tirisis fortress 1st centuri B.J.C.

/aproximateby picture/



Medieval gate
/modern view/



Middle fortification line
/modern view/



The fortress grew again into a large and well fortified town and port in the 13th-14th c. Since the 12th c. it appeared on navigation maps and atlases under the name Kaliakra, which name it bears today. Due to its favourable location and strategic advantages Kaliakra turned into one of the political centres of the split Bulgarian state in the 14th c. and became the capital of the independent Dobrudzha despot kingdom of the northeast territories.

The first evidence about the place dates back to 1346 when the Bulgarian boyar Balik separated as an independent ruler. The capital of the despot kingdom was in Karvuna (today's Kavarna) during his rule.

During the rule of Balik's successor, Dobrotisa, who widened the borders of the kingdom, the centre was moved to the big and strategically important fortress Kaliakra. The Byzantian chronicler Laonik Chalchochondilas called it the Fortress of Dobrotisa, and the Munich knight Johann Schiltberger called it the Capital of the Third Bulgaria.

During the rule of Dobrotitsa a new defense system was built, generally repeating the fortress pattern of earlier periods. Characteristic for the urban structure of Kaliakra in the 13th-14th c. was the outlining of three urban bodies of different size and plan, like in the late Antiquity period. Those were the Citadel (or the so-called inner town) of area of 25 decars, the "outer town" of the same area and the "suburb" of area of 100 decars.

Like the other mediaeval towns, the suburb was inhabited by lower society: animal breeders, seamen and fishermen. The outer town was most probably inhabited by traders, clergy, clerks and wealthier people, and the citadel was the place where the aristocracy lived represented by the despot, his closest noblemen, the

higher clergy and garrison commander.

The largest building in the citadel was the despot's palace built on a high terrace south to the fortress wall. It was planned as a closed rectangle of chain-like arranged rooms built out of stone and wood and surrounding a spacious inner yard.

The number of churches in Kaliakra is unknown, but archeological finds suggest that the mediaeval town had considerable number of church edifices, their building supported by the despot himself. This is explained by the fact that the Dobrudzha despot kingdom was ecclesiastically independent from the Turnovo King and Patriarch, and Kaliakra, being the capital, was also an ecclesiastic centre.

The system of clerical life in the second half of the 14th c. included the numerous rock caves and niches converted into churches or cells. One of the caves in the outer town, for example, where the museum exhibition is arranged today, once served as a church.

Mediaeval Kaliakra had a large and reliable port, which, like in earlier ages, stood in the lee west side of the cape, well sheltered from the north winds and currents.



Earth fortification
moats and embankments

Fortified wall
170 m long

Medieval
churches

A

B

KALIAKRA 14th Century
(Approximate map of the medieval fortress)



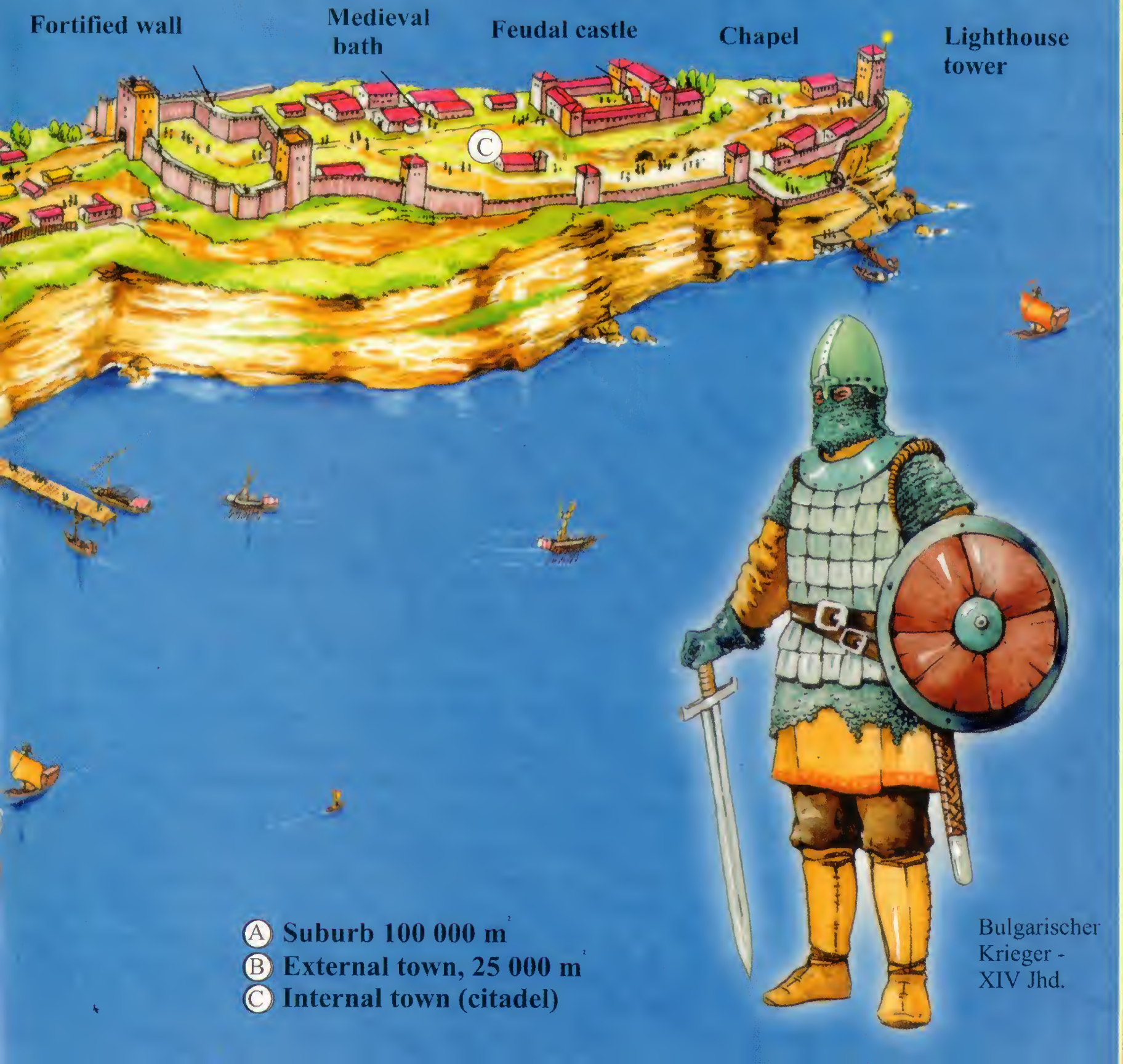
Fortified wall

Medieval
bath

Feudal castle

Chapel

Lighthouse
tower



- (A) Suburb 100 000 m²
- (B) External town, 25 000 m²
- (C) Internal town (citadel)

Bulgarischer
Krieger -
XIV Jhd.

The fact that the town and port were marked on many mediaeval maps and atlases of the second half of the 13th c. point at its significance for the coastal navigation and sea connections to the other Black sea ports. It can be concluded by the contract of 1387 signed between Dobrotitsa's successor Ivanko and the Genoa Republic that the port of Kaliakra served mainly for export of cereal and other farming products from Dobrudzha, and salt, jewelry and artifacts of the applied arts were imported for the needs of the aristocracy. Because of the high and steep cliffs, which made access to the port difficult, the cereals were brought down to the storage places on seawater level through a tunnel cut out in the rock. Then the load was transported to the ships anchored in the bay by boats.

The specific geographic location of mediaeval Kaliakra did not allow for the development of the typical mediaeval handicrafts: pottery, gold crafting and carpentry. The objects of luxury and everyday life were imported. There are reliable written sources evidencing of well-developed animal breeding, hunting and fishing, iron processing, trade and navigation and certain domestic handicrafts. The numerous finds of foreign and Bulgarian coins, including coins minted by despot Dobrotitsa evidence that trade occupied a considerable share of the economic life of Kaliakra.

There is no concrete evidence for the Turkish conquest over Kaliakra. Sultan Murad the 1st (1362-1389) sent an army of 80 000 under the leadership of Ali Pasha against Tzar Ivan Shishman. Out of this army, a cavalry of 5000 under the leadership of Miralai Yakshi Bei headed to northeast Bulgaria and conquered considerable part of the Dobrudzha despot kingdom. Probably Kaliakra fell under the Ottoman rule at that same time. A decade later, when the Turkish army was defeat at Ankara by Tamburlane's army in 1204, the Wallachian ruler Mircho Stari (1387-1418) con-

quered part of Dobrudzha, including Silistra and Kaliakra. For a certain period of time those places remained within Wallachian territory but after a couple of ravaging marches of Mehmed the 1st (1402-1421) in 1417, 1419 and 1420, Dobrudzha was brought back again within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire

The name of the fortress is also related to the march of the Polish-Hungarian king Vladislav the 3rd Yagelo (1440-1444), at the beginning of November 1444. One detachment of Hungarian knights conquered the fortresses of Karvuna and Kaliakra a couple of days before the battle of Varna.

The dramatic events of the end of the 14th c. and the beginning of the 15th c. almost depopulated the suburb of the mediaeval fortress. Later, in the 16th-17th c. the outer town was gradually deserted as well. The severe climate, lack of reliable means of living and suppressers' assaults drove the Bulgarian inhabitants out of the fortress. The Turkish garrison dislocated in the inner city also decreased in number. Kaliakra gradually decayed to turn into a small fortification in the 18th c.





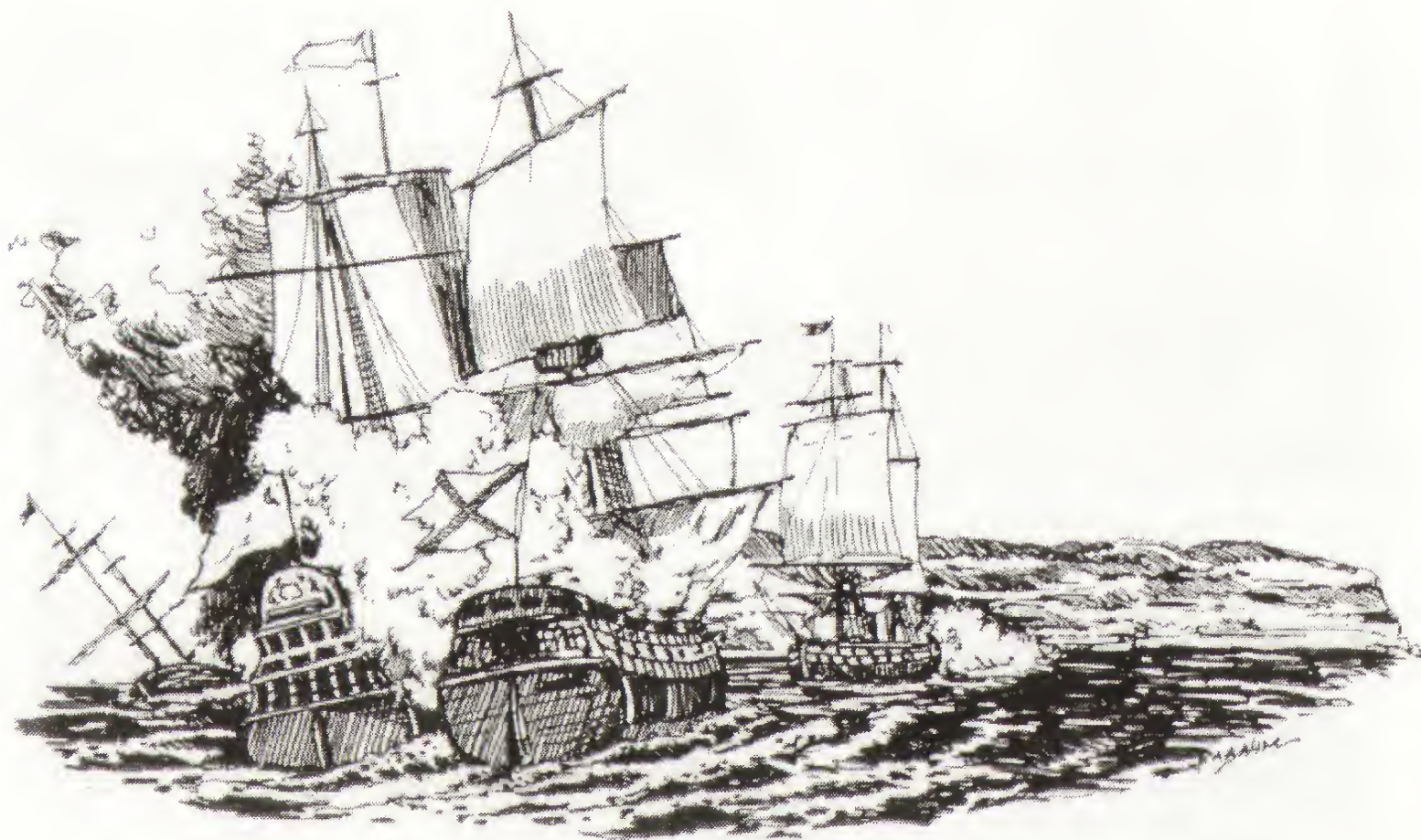
The Citadel /modern view/



**The Chapel
"St. Nicola
Wonder Worker"**



Kaliakra witnessed one of the largest Black sea battles on 31 July 1791. A Russian squadron under the leadership of the famous rear admiral F. F. Ushakov defeated the much more numerous Turkish-Algerian armada under the commandment of Capudan Hussein Pasha at the west coast. This defeat put an end to the Russo-Turkish war of 1787-1791 and kindled assurance for sooner liberation in the hearts of the suppressed Bulgarians.



The Legend

The autumn of the year of our Lord 1388 was a hard one. The Bulgarian land was living through evil days. The Ottomans sward cut in bloody blows and there was no courage to stop them. The strong fortresses were falling one by one; famous boyar families bent their knees before the invaders, fled away or fell under the sward.

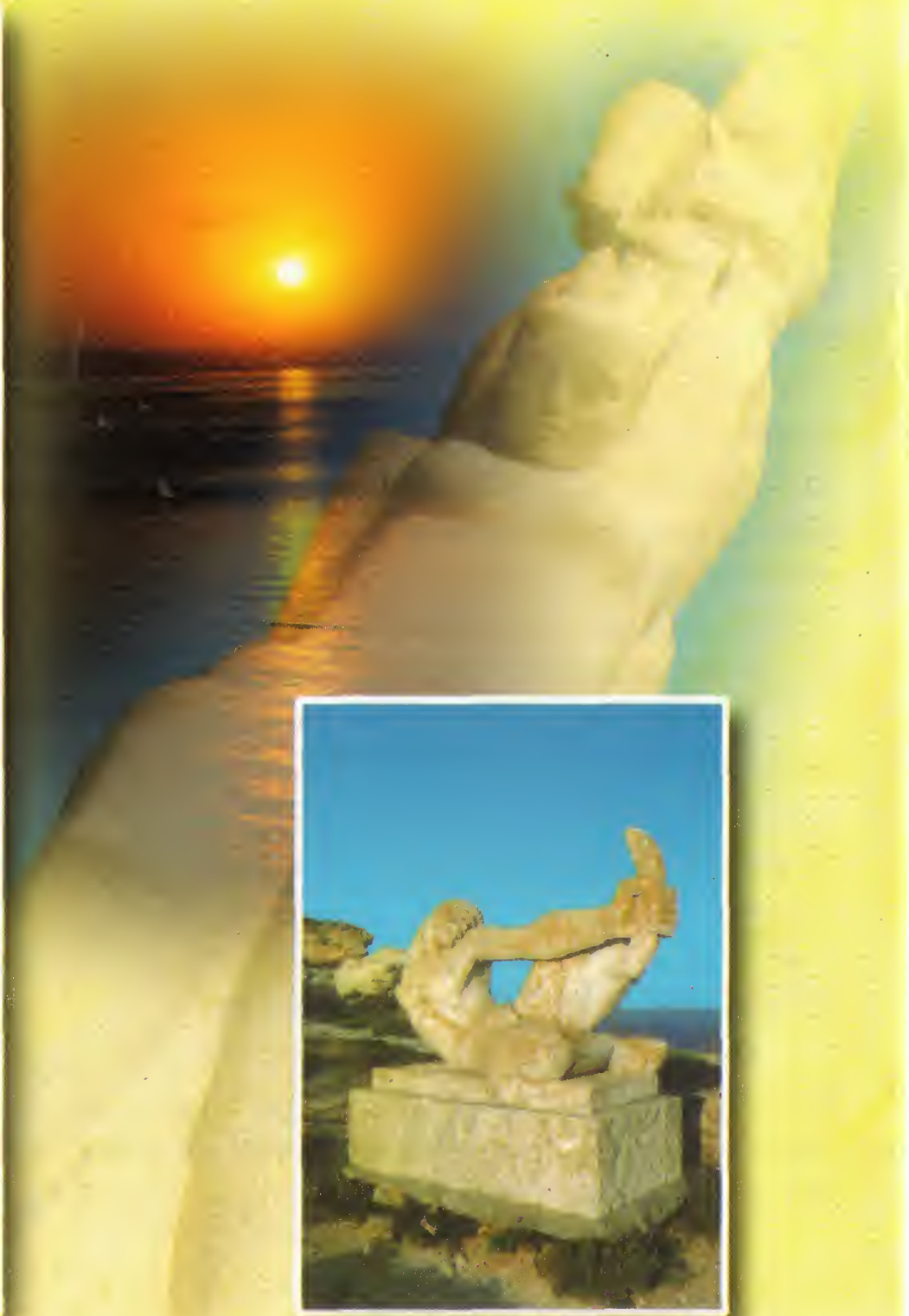
God was no longer extending His blessing had over the land on the Tzars of the Assen and Shishman family. Because it had been prophesied long ago that a day of suffering and death would come. But the Balkan rulers were fighting for a bigger patch of land and remained blind for the frightful invaders. Each fought with each. A tentative moment of peace was followed by new intrigues throwing the Christians in fight against one other. And they all sought an ally in the Ottomans not knowing that they were leading the wolf straight among the sheep.

A bloody wave washed over the land of Dobrotitsa. But the old despot was no longer there to rule the lands from Kylia to Mesemvria with a steely hand. Ivanko locked himself behind the fort walls of Varna and was probably waiting God to fight off the invaders with thunder and lightning. It happened so that the old capital of the despot kingdom lived like in old days. People and cattle were flooding the roads. And no good news was heard from anywhere. What was left to them? Was it to wait for their turn and to die but not to surrender to invaders' mercy?

The defenders of the fortress had been fighting off the ravaging attacks of Yakshi Bei's hordes for 14 days. Night and day the scream of zourlas and frantic thud of drums was heard from the camp of the invaders. There were no more arrows left. The spears broke. The barns were empty. The water wells went dry.



The Monument of the 40 Maidens



The Monument of the Last Defender

Only the will of the defenders was not broken. They were determined to die but not to surrender the old capital of Dobrotitsa. And their determination was supported by yet another thing. In those frightful days, the warriors' mothers, daughters and sweethearts were fighting alongside their men on the fortress walls. And Kaliakra, the daughter of the castrophylax was everywhere around. What had made the old devoted warrior of Dobrotitsa to name his daughter after the capital? No one knew. Her mother had died too early, and the old Dobrotitsa, busy with his duties, trained his daughter in the art of war instead of homemaking intricacies. And the maid grew up under the men's care of her father and his courtiers. She rode her horse just like a man in hunting chase; she could sward-fight and stretched the string of her bow. Only her eyes revealed her feminine beauty inherited from her mother. And that dainty smile shining like pure gold on her lips that made men's hearts throb faster.

But the smile had disappeared from the young girl's face those days. Eyebrows drawn and lips pressed tight, just like her father's, Kaliakra was everywhere on the fortress walls. She would bring water, dress a wound, and close the eyes of a killed warrior. And sometimes she was throwing spears and arching arrows at the invaders. As if an evil spirit haunted the slender girl's figure. Her silhouette flew like a demon over the fortress walls and frightened the invaders.

But all efforts were in vain. The defenders were growing sparser in number, their strength was depleting day after day. The treacherous Genovese had closed the way to the sea. They had betrayed Ivanko and now they were supporting the Ottomans. And only a few boats, a tiny part of the once powerful fleet of Dobrotitsa tried to fight back the attacks to the port, but more because their captains knew the passes through the dangerous shallows rather than with strength.

But the ring was tightening. And evil was coming closer and closer. The defenders knew that men would be killed and women and children would be taken in slavery like everywhere else.

The beautiful girl had decided on her fate. Her heart had made its choice long time ago and it had chosen one of the boat captains. He was young and joyful and had captured the girl's heart with his stories of faraway lands. But he was no longer alive. His boat had attacked one of the Genovese boats and both ships sunk into the sea depths. The few survivors could not tell what had happened to their captain. And Kaliakra's heart numbed into stony coldness. The fatigue and sorrow melted away the shine of her eyes. Her face grew sad and pale, like Mary's face on the icons. Her thoughts often flew over the fortress walls, soared like birds above the port and flew faraway over the endless sea where her sweetheart had disappeared.

And now, when the end was coming, she knew what she would do. And she preferred to die rather than stay in the harem of some measly infidel dog. And in the aftermath of an attack she gathered her friends and talked them into her frightful choice. And only the pale moon was silent witness of their oath.

When one morning the hordes launched their attack, there was no one to stop them. The few defenders fell one by one. Yet another Bulgarian fortress was falling into Ottoman hands. But the winners could not see anyone to take their revenge for the long and stubborn fight. There was only one thing left to them, as it had happened many times before when they were overtaking the fortresses of those determined people: to indulge themselves in plunder and destruction. And at the very cape, where a group of girls was standing close together, the prize for their efforts and strain was waiting, young women's flesh, the greatest award for the "true believers".



The girls were standing just at a step from the open gorge, their long hair loose, their dress ragged and stained in blood, tears dry on their faces. Under the caress of the gentle breeze they were staring in the purple light of dawn and the inviting blue of the sky, clear and bright like their youth never lived to an end.

Holding tightly to one another, beautiful and powerful, they were staring into the horizon where their maiden dreams were vanishing. And when the savage horde launched like an avalanche to the innocent girls, their hands bloody and their smiles lusty, some invisible force brought the girls back to the horror of the frightening reality. The girls raised their heads, their eyes shining with determination and will and, drawing tight their last strength, the forty girls flew like a fly of freed birds into the dark abyss.

The Ottomans could not believe their eyes. And they were asking themselves was this the true way lead by Allah to conquer this determined people.

People whose flesh could be conquered but not their souls.



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I have been in three countries called
Bulgaria.

The first Bulgaria lies where one passes
from Hungary through Jelezni Vrata and its
capital is called Vidin.

The second Bulgaria lies in front of
Wallachian land and its capital is called
Tarnovo.

The third Bulgaria lies where Danube runs
into Black Sea and its capital is called
Kalatserka (Kaliakra).

Johan Schilttenberg, Knight from Munich,
participant in the battle of Nikopol, 25 September 1396

